

Emporia's Incongruent Reformer

Charles Vernon Eskridge,
the *Emporia Republican*, and the
Kansas Republican Party, 1860–1900

by Christopher Childers

Most contemporaries of Emporia politician and newspaper editor Charles Vernon Eskridge would not have called him a reformer. Like many Gilded Age men, he married his diverse business interests with politics and political power in his efforts to succeed. But in the last years of his life, Eskridge was a harbinger of the progressive Republican reform agenda that changed Kansas politics in the first decade of the twentieth century. Men such as rival editor William Allen White carried the reform mantle well into the new century, but Eskridge's significance rests in his call for reform from within the Republican Party that anticipated its progressive realignment. Amidst financial ruin and scandal, largely brought on by his banker friend and political ally Charles S. Cross, Eskridge's life ended before he could articulate more than broad policy goals. Eskridge anticipated the reform move-

ment, however, and made a significant contribution to it, even though his own record was not congruent with reform politics.

Emporia's late nineteenth-century editor and incongruent reformer, Charles Vernon Eskridge, was born in Fauquier County, Virginia, in 1833 to a family of modest means. The family moved to Ohio the following year and in 1838 went on to Lewiston, Illinois. Eskridge moved to Lawrence, Kansas, in 1855 where he was employed as a printer and occasional writer by the *Herald of Freedom*, a free-state newspaper established by the New England Emigrant Aid Company. His politics and his trade were shaped by his early experiences. Soon Eskridge settled in Lyon County where he helped found the town of Emporia and nurtured his business and political aspirations.¹ During the next forty-four years he served Emporia and the state of Kansas through his political career and his newspaper, the *Emporia Republican*, first published in January 1882 and issued as both a daily and a weekly.

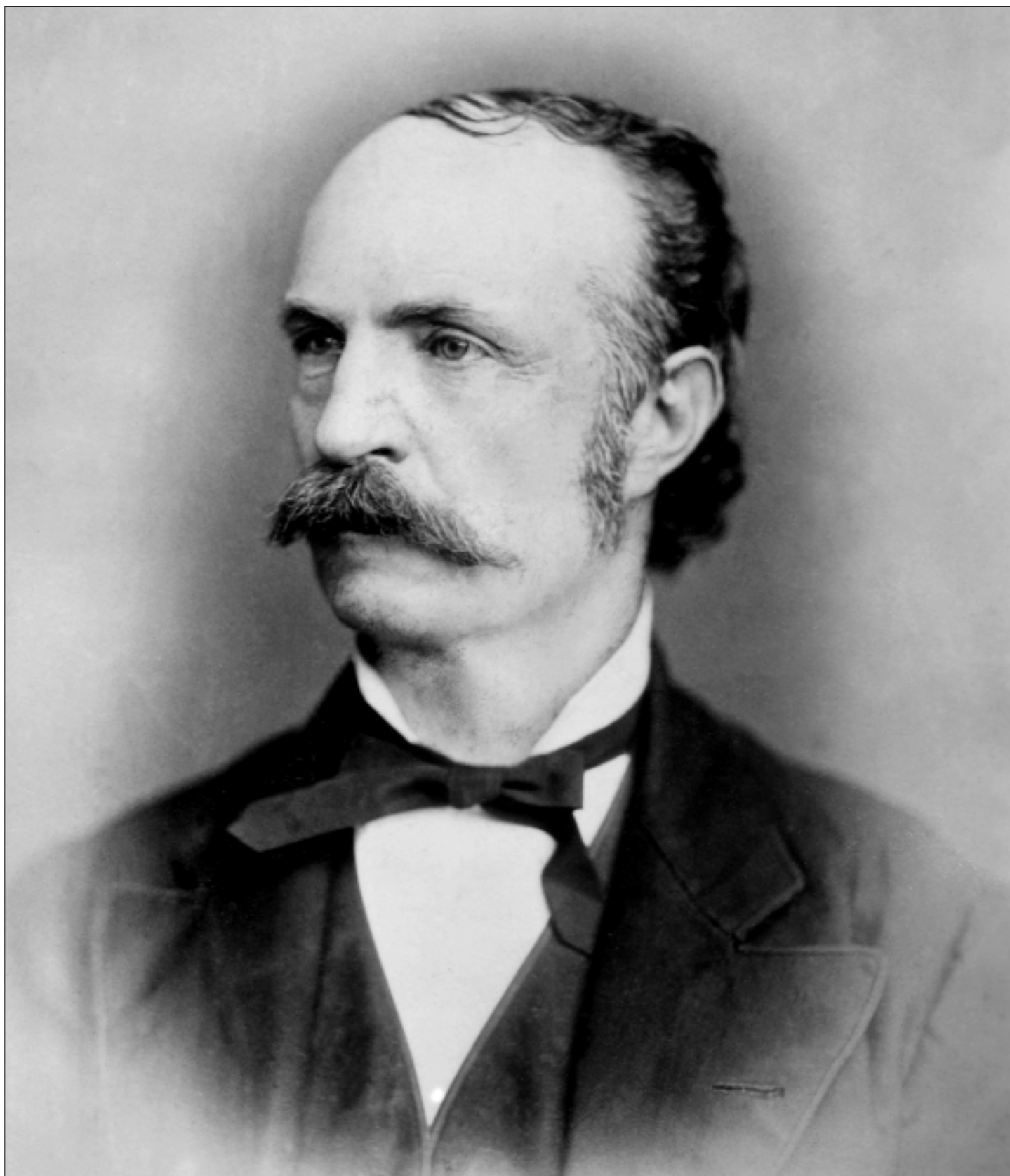
Eskridge was early recognized as an astute politician. He was the agent for the Emporia Town Company, served

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The author acknowledges the assistance of Dr. John M. Sacher, Dr. Karen Manners Smith, and Dr. Sam Dicks, Emporia State University. He also gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Max Kraus, Emporia State University Archives, and Timothy Rives, National Archives and Records Administration, Kansas City, Missouri.

Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 28 (Spring 2005): 2–15.

1. Sources regarding Eskridge's early life are scant, but for general information, see William G. Cutler and Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 2:848, 853–54; Laura French, *History of Emporia and Lyon County* (Emporia, Kans.: Emporia Gazette Print, 1929). For Eskridge's obituaries, see *Emporia Gazette*, July 16, July 23, 1900, and *Emporia Weekly Republican*, July 19, 1900.



Charles Vernon Eskridge



Emporia's first pressman, Jacob Stotler (left), became Eskridge's rival, and the two men maintained a bitter feud during most of their professional careers.

as the clerk of then Breckinridge (Lyon) County, and during these formative years worked to gain the county seat for Emporia from the smaller rival town of Americus. Through the various public offices he held, including several terms in the state legislature, Eskridge gained recognition as he worked to obtain institutions for Emporia and Lyon County. Eskridge also authored legislation that allowed two Lyon County school districts to issue bonds to finance the erection of school buildings. In the following session, legislators expanded the scope of the law to apply to all Kansas common schools.² When he failed to obtain the state university for Emporia, he quickly took a suggestion from a colleague to lobby for a normal school. Thanks to Eskridge's political maneuvering, Emporia got the school and Eskridge served as its advocate for the rest of his life.³

2. From 1882 to 1903 Eskridge's presses issued both the *Emporia Daily Republican* and the *Emporia Weekly Republican*. For a basic summary of Eskridge's public career, see Cutler and Andreas, *History of the State of Kansas*, 2:853–54. Eskridge held the following elected offices: county clerk and recorder, 1858; probate judge, 1859; state representative, 1859, re-elected 1862; state senator, 1864; lieutenant governor, 1868; state representative, 1871; Emporia city councilman, 1870, 1873–1874; state representative, 1874. See *Kansas House Journal*, January 17, 1863, 47, February 24, 316; "An Act to Authorize School Districts Nos. one and twenty-two, in Lyon County, to issue Bonds," *Kansas Laws* (1863), ch. 58; "An Act to Authorize School Districts to Issue Bonds," *Kansas Laws* (1864), ch. 19.

3. Lyman B. Kellogg, "The Founding of the State Normal School," *Kansas Historical Collections*, 1911–1912 12 (1912): 95; *Emporia News*, June 11, 1869.

Eskridge was actively involved in business ventures, which his political influence helped prosper. He occupied much of his time in the 1870s, along with several of his associates, developing Creswell (later Arkansas City, Kansas).⁴ Although land speculation involved risk, many Emporia citizens who engaged in the business, including Eskridge, earned handsome profits and prestige. As a land speculator, encouraging railroad development was in Eskridge's best interests, and he used his political strength to gain land and railroad connections to this area. Eskridge believed that bonding railroads was advantageous if the taxable value of the region where the railroad was placed increased accordingly, so he supported bond issues for several railroad lines to the Arkansas City area.⁵ As a major investor in the region, Eskridge stood to benefit considerably from this railroad venture. But his rival Jacob Stotler and the *Emporia News* opposed the bond proposal, as did Lyon County voters in an April 1873 canvass.⁶

While he was successful in garnering the respect and support of settlers in the Walnut River valley, Eskridge lost touch with Emporia on this and other issues. Compounded by his outspokenness and his love of political fighting, Eskridge's ambitions to become governor (his friends called him governor) were hampered, and he departed from elective office after the 1876 legislative session. His

4. The Delphi Town Company, which developed Creswell, included Henry Brace Norton, who located the site, Lyman B. Kellogg, W. T. Soden, and other prominent Emporians. See Lyman B. Kellogg, "Recollections [1915]," ch. 6 (manuscript, University Libraries and Archives, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kans.). For more information on his speculative activities, see also *Emporia News*, July 31, 1868, February 25, 1870.

5. *Emporia News*, April 11, 1873.

6. *Ibid.*, April 25, 1873. Eskridge's involvement in railroads at this time and earlier is well chronicled in the Emporia newspapers. In later years Eskridge, like many other newspaper editors who relied on railroad patronage, developed a relationship with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in the 1880s. For Eskridge's involvement in the Santa Fe "bond scandal," see *Emporia Democrat*, October 15–22, 1884; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, December 28, 1882–January 4, 1883, November 8, 1883. For Eskridge's involvement in the incorporation of various smaller trunk line railroads, of which there were many, see *Emporia Democrat*, June 9, 1886; *Emporia Journal*, January 20–February 10, 1881; *Emporia News*, April 11, 1873; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, February 7, 1884, January 28, April 1, 1886. See also William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946), 264.

In 1890 Eskridge purchased his rival newspaper, the Emporia News, and combined it with the Republican. Jacob Stotler, longtime News editor, had fallen victim to the Republican's stiff competition and left Emporia in 1884.

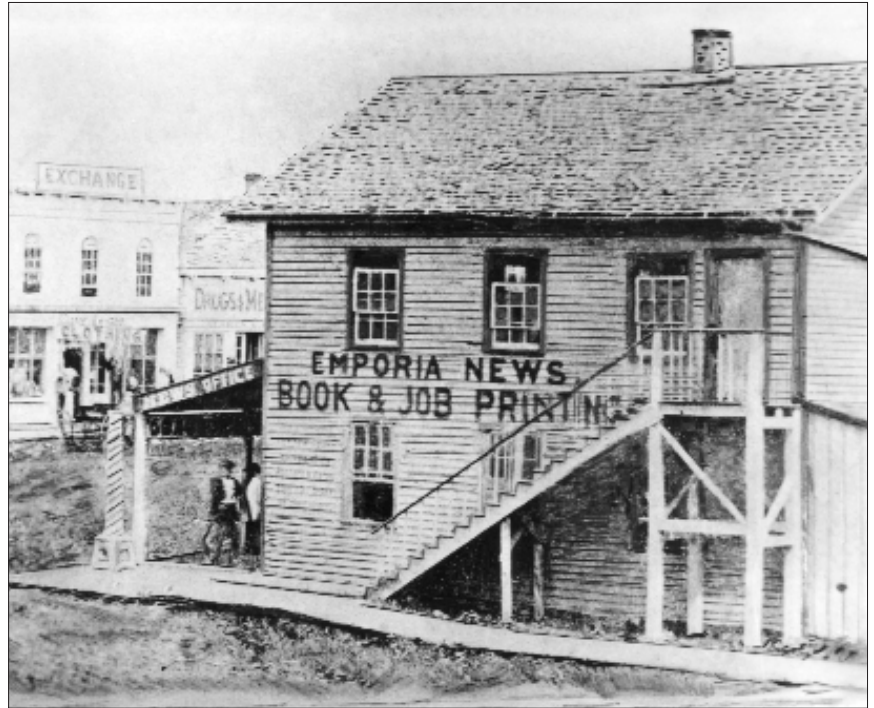
political career had not ended however; Eskridge purchased the *Emporia Ledger* newspaper in December 1881, established the *Republican* in January 1882, and used the latter as his political rostrum thereafter.⁷ The newspaper provided Eskridge an unfettered medium through which he could deliver his message at any time with all the candor and temper he pleased.

Most late nineteenth-century towns of Emporia's size supported several partisan newspapers. These newspapers competed along party and factional lines for business, and many newspapers failed. Within the community, the press served several roles. Newspapers often were boosters, promoting the benefits of the community. Elections were fought through the press, and editors often used the partisan press to elevate themselves to civic and political leadership roles. They recognized that partisan battles were good for business. Overall, newspapers reflected the political climate of the day. As western author and journalist David Dary noted:

The pages of newspapers published in the West between the late 1860s and about 1900 reflect the fact that there was little real difference nationally in the policies of the Democrats and the Republicans. Both avoided the chief issues of American life and in their political campaigns for support relied on trite phrases such as "party loyalty." Perhaps precisely because of this, local politics and political reporting in this period are more colorful.⁸

7. Eskridge purchased the *Emporia Ledger* from H.W. McCune on December 20, 1881, but McCune continued as editor of the *Ledger* until it ceased publication with the January 12 issue. See *Emporia Ledger*, January 5, 12, 1882; *Kansas Sentinel* (Emporia), January 11, 1882. The first issue of the *Emporia Daily Republican* was January 21, 1882; the *Emporia Weekly Republican* was first issued January 26, 1882.

8. David Dary, *Red Blood and Black Ink: Journalism in the Old West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 22, 48, 55.



Eskridge, like many western editors, recognized the personal political benefit of editing a newspaper and used it to revive his flagging political career.

Purchasing the *Ledger* and remaking it into his own newspaper fit well with Eskridge's political and business interests in the 1880s. He participated in the economic boom of that time through active investment in railroads, town development, and business interests. The *Republican* gave him a medium to communicate his ideas and interests to a wide population. Eskridge then immediately embarked upon a program of steady improvements to the paper and its physical plant. Within a year after printing the first issue of the *Republican*, he built a commercial storefront to house the newspaper and his offices at the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue and Merchant Street.⁹ The adjacent printing works were costly and elaborate.

Eskridge's *Republican* prospered in its early years, and business from the developing southwest region increased its profits. Eskridge competed bitterly with rival editor Stotler of the *Emporia News*. The *News*, Emporia's original newspaper, was an evening paper started by Preston B. Plumb in 1857. Stotler and Eskridge were longtime rivals and maintained a feud for most of their professional careers. The origin of their feud is unclear, but most likely it began in the 1863 legislative campaign when the two ran

9. *Emporia Weekly Republican*, January 18, 25, 1883.



From the time Eskridge printed the first issue of the Republican in 1882, he continually developed and improved his business and provided an impressive product to the citizens of Emporia and the region.

than he did, and Stotler's *News* gleefully reported Eskridge's defeat to a temperance man who entered the race late.¹¹ Identifying a conclusive origin for many of these factional quarrels is difficult, but the likely cause is that both Stotler and Eskridge wanted power. All the while the men fought through their respective newspapers, accusing each other of corruption and deceit. But ultimately Emporia could not sustain two daily newspapers. In 1884 stiff competition from Eskridge sent the ill-tempered Stotler packing to Wellington, Kansas. In May 1890 Eskridge purchased the *News-Democrat* and consolidated it with the *Republican*.¹²

For his part, Eskridge provided an impressive product to the citizens of Emporia and the region. He did not let them forget it either. Eskridge shamelessly promoted himself and the *Republican* in the paper's columns, especially during its early years. The newspaper carried Associated Press wire service reports and engaged in correspondence with many of the smaller towns that dotted east-central Kansas.¹³ Within several years of acquiring the *Republican*, Eskridge captured many of Stotler's subscribers—in essence, Eskridge's morning *Republican* made Stotler's evening *News* and Stotler himself seemingly irrelevant to many. Active correspondence with the "southwest" region also was a staple of Eskridge's newspaper. By communicating with outlying areas and frequently covering their news, the *Republican* won friends and subscribers through-

against each other for a seat in the Kansas House of Representatives.¹⁰ Although they held similar political opinions, it appears that the men genuinely disliked each other. They fought over many issues, especially at election time, and usually backed opposing candidates for the Republican nomination to state level offices. In 1871 a dispute at the Kansas State Normal School over its president, Lyman B. Kellogg, spilled over into the state representative election. Eskridge, who was vying for the nomination, backed Kellogg, while Stotler, who supported another candidate for the legislature, opposed him. Both sides made petty accusations that intensified their mutual dislike. Three years later Stotler and Eskridge battled over prohibition. In a stance he later changed, Eskridge supported licensing saloons to produce revenue, while Stotler advocated prohibition. The liquor license fight was an opening salvo for Emporia's April 1875 mayoral elections, in which Eskridge was a candidate. Eskridge placed third in the election, with the top two candidates receiving two hundred more votes

10. *Emporia News*, September 5, 1863.

11. See *ibid.*, March 24, 31, September 1, 1871; *Emporia Ledger*, November 5, 1874; *Emporia News*, January 1, April 2, 9, 1875.

12. For examples of Stotler and Eskridge's earliest attacks on each other, see *Emporia Ledger*, September 24–October 15, 1874; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, May 11–25, November 16, 1882. "The Newspaper War," *Kansas Sentinel*, January 25, 1882, is an excellent analysis of the battle for supremacy between Stotler and Eskridge. It also shows how the competing papers operated. For Stotler's departure, see *Emporia Democrat*, September 13, 1884; *Emporia News*, September 4, 1884. For Eskridge's purchase of the *News-Democrat*, see *Emporia Weekly News-Democrat*, May 1, 1890; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, May 1, 1890.

13. For the editor's comments on the *Republican* during its first year, see *Emporia Weekly Republican*, February 9, 1882. For Eskridge's promotion of his paper, see *ibid.*, June 22, November 2, 16, 1882, January 18, 25, 1883. See also "New Year's Edition," *Emporia Daily Republican*, January 2, 1883; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, November 2, 1882.

out the region. Eskridge covered state and national events in the *Republican* as well. He often spoke out on issues of national importance and placed them in the context of Kansas politics.¹⁴

Eskridge expressed his political philosophy not only through the medium of the editorial but also through commentary on the news of the day and through his selections of what was newsworthy. One of his earliest editorials was an endorsement of prohibition in Kansas. Eskridge became an ardent supporter of prohibition, which was incongruous with his earlier opinions that liquor establishments should be licensed and regulated for a source of revenue. By 1882 Eskridge had changed his tune: "With our regard for religion, morality, and the best interests of society, we must be counted squarely with the Prohibition party."¹⁵ In light of his previous record, Eskridge's support of prohibition seemed more based on Kansas's prevailing political climate than on a concern for society.

Eskridge also articulated his views on monetary policy. He objected when Topeka's *Daily Commonwealth* endorsed discontinuing the coinage of silver. The *Daily Commonwealth* also supported efforts to curb the printing of greenback dollars. Eskridge consistently supported an open monetary policy and reminded the *Daily Commonwealth* that past Kansas Republican Party platforms had done the same. Eskridge's critique of the Republicans in 1882 reveals his dissatisfaction with the party's factionalism. In the fall of 1882 when, for the first time, Kansas Republicans lost the governorship to Democrat George W. Glick, Eskridge asserted that Republicans believed, "a defeat of their own party is the only way to purge it of the parasitical growths which a long and flourishing lease of power has fastened upon it."¹⁶ He accused Republican newspapers and politicians of not solidly supporting the Republican incumbent, Governor John P. St. John, a prohibitionist seeking a third term of office, insinuating that their lack of support led to Glick's election. Eskridge repeatedly chastised party leaders for allowing factional issues such as prohibition, suffrage, railroads, and bossism to needlessly divide the party.

14. Eskridge outlined his stand on many national issues in the *Emporia Weekly Republican*. The following citations are good examples of his work. On prohibition, see February 2, 1882. On monetary policy, see June 22, August 31, 1882, November 19, 1885, June 1, 29, 1899, March 1, April 26, 1900. On national political parties and campaigns, see November 16, 1882. On labor relations, see April 29, May 6, 1886, August 31, 1899, March 10, 1900.

15. *Ibid.*, February 2, 1882.

16. *Ibid.*, June 22, August 31, November 16, 1882.

Because local Republican Party leaders played a significant role in crafting party policy through local political conventions and through other means, they held a significant stake in the party's success.¹⁷ Eskridge used the *Republican* to influence Kansas Republican politics away from the influence of political bosses and corruption. He crystallized this ideology in the late 1890s when he endorsed a reform-based Republican agenda.

As competition goes, the *Emporia Daily Gazette* was no match for the *Republican* in the early 1890s. The *Gazette* was founded in 1890 as a Populist newspaper. The next year William Yoast Morgan purchased the paper and made it a Republican paper in competition with Eskridge's *Republican*.¹⁸ Under Morgan's control, the paper struggled to remain operational during its early years. In 1895 Morgan sold the paper to William Allen White for three thousand dollars, a figure that Morgan himself admitted was high. Eskridge mocked in the *Republican* that "W. Y. Morgan played an immense joke on this community when he sold the *Gazette* to a lunatic." White worked feverishly to improve the paper, an effort that brought greater circulation. Yet White found "it was difficult to convince advertisers of this [gains in circulation] when directories like Rowell's continued to rank the *Gazette* as under one thousand circulation, along with the faltering *Republican*." A year after Eskridge's death White vented his frustration to an advertising agency, saying that he did not like "playing second fiddle to a paper that has less than one third of the circulation of the *Gazette*."¹⁹ Historian Sally Foreman Griffith implied that other newspapers, including the *Republican*, falsified their circulation statements. Without Eskridge's business records, the claim is impossible to prove, but as she noted, the practice was hardly uncommon at the time. In spite of the difficulty, White built his newspaper into a viable competitor and eventually outpaced the *Re-*

17. *Ibid.*, November 16, December 21, 1882. Public participation in Gilded Age politics was common in midwestern states. See Allan Peskin, "Who Were the Stalwarts? Who Were Their Rivals? Republican Factions in the Gilded Age," *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (Winter 1984-1985): 707.

18. White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 256; *Emporia Daily Gazette*, May 21, 1892.

19. *Emporia Weekly Republican*, August 22, 1895; Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 81. For Eskridge's rebuttal to some of White's claims, see *Emporia Weekly Republican*, August 10, 1899.

publican in a move reminiscent of Eskridge’s prior defeat of Jacob Stotler’s *Emporia News*.²⁰

Curiously, White held Eskridge in low esteem and vice versa from the beginning. White’s description of Eskridge in his autobiography is a careful but negative assessment of his old competitor. White’s observations show that he understood the nature of the Emporia business community and hierarchy far better than he may have let on. Furthermore, although White tried to distance himself from the factional struggles in Emporia, he knew exactly how the system worked.

The editor of the *Republican* was a man in his sixties who had served the town in the legislature, who had secured the location of the State Teachers College in Emporia, who was an acknowledged leader of the Republican Party in Kansas, and vicegerent of the Santa Fe Railroad, which named a town [Eskridge, Wabaunsee County] for him on one of its branches in an adjoining county. He was a dignified man with a rather large head who covered the bald frontal area of his skull with long hair from the side and dyed it, and who always wrote the resolutions at the Republican county convention. He was of the samurai caste in Kansas Republicanism, receiving remuneration from the Santa Fe as needed for his paper’s pay roll, and was a spokesman of the [First National] bank, the Cross–Martindale bank. When it was closed, a few years later, a sheaf of the old editor’s blank notes, accommodation paper, was found in the bank which they slipped into the note case to polish up the record for the national bank inspector.

White’s hostility towards his nemesis continued:

He did not realize it, but I was the young bull who had come to horn the old one out of the herd. Toward the end of his career, as was the fashion of the day, he devoted much space to abusing me. The *Gazette* never replied. Not a line in our paper indicated that we even knew he was on earth; and that—

his reporters told ours—galled him even more deeply than anything we could say. He was used to every form of abuse but contempt.²¹

White recognized Eskridge when Eskridge made news, but he did not respond to the attacks that Eskridge made against him in the *Republican*. More interesting is the intensity of White’s words toward Eskridge, written approximately thirty-five years after Eskridge’s death. White may have galled Eskridge first, but it certainly seems that Eskridge lastingly galled White.

Eskridge did his best to provoke White into a newspaper war. The *Republican* frequently carried stories about the *Gazette* and “Silly Willy” White in hopes of getting a feud going in the style that Jacob Stotler and Eskridge had enjoyed years before. One of the more significant feuds came in April 1899 when White was caned by Emporia mayoral candidate Luther Severy. White had endorsed Severy’s opponent, H. B. Morse, in the Emporia mayoral campaign. When Morse won, White celebrated in the *Gazette* and stated that “[t]he defeat of L. Severy is a public rebuke to a man who will let his ambition override his ideas of personal honor. The defeat is stinging. It is humiliating and it is proper that it should be.”²² The next day the two met on the street outside a restaurant and exchanged words. Apparently White offered to shake Severy’s hand and was refused. As the editor turned to walk away, Severy hit White with his cane and knocked him to the ground. White went into the restaurant to clean himself up and was met by another man. This man made a joke, saying that White was a coward for turning his back to Severy. White slapped him in the face and a small fight started. Severy and White were arrested and were forced to pay fines for their actions. The next day, April 6, 1899, the *Gazette* chronicled the incident and stated that “it had nothing to retract about Mr. Severy. It still believes that his age has withered his sense of honor. The fact that even an old man would strike in the back and seem proud of it, indicates how far senility has deadened manhood.” Eskridge attempted to use the incident to make White look like a disrespectful young man, going so far as to help set up a collection to buy Severy a new cane and pay for his fine. Years later, with the animosity long cleared, White recalled the incident as unfortunate and stated that it was “a case of temper with him and idle

20. The following is a table of circulation records for the *Republican* and *Gazette*.

	Year	<i>Republican</i>	<i>Gazette</i>
Circulation	1890	2,000	<500
	1896	(unknown)	900
	1903	< 1,000	2,000

See Griffith, *Home Town News*, 36, 43, 72; *Kansas Historical and Descriptive Review*, vol. 2, *Eastern Section* (Topeka: J. Lethem, 1890), 130. The *Emporia Standard*, October 25, 1890, states that the *Republican*’s circulation decreased from two thousand in 1885 to six hundred in 1890.

21. White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 263–64.
22. *Emporia Daily Gazette*, April 5, 1899.

William Allen White purchased the Emporia Daily Gazette in 1895 and built his newspaper into a viable competitor that eventually outpaced the Republican, much as Eskridge had done to Stotler's Emporia News.

meanness with me, put into rather cutting and unjustified rhetoric."²³

Politically, White and Eskridge were not far apart. White's own politics changed over time, but "[i]n the nineties he had been, in his own words, 'a child of the governing classes,' and 'a stouthearted young reactionary,' who rallied with other young Kansas Republicans against the Populists," observed Richard Hofstadter. Indeed, the editorial that made White a national figure, "What's the Matter With Kansas?" was a "fierce anti-Populist diatribe." After the turn of the century, however, White began to support many reform policies and later would come to regret the hot words of his famous editorial. Eskridge firmly stood with the Republican Party. In fact, White stated that Eskridge held a stronger allegiance to the party than he did himself.²⁴ However, Eskridge was not afraid to chastise his party for its failure to respond to the peoples' wishes, as he did after the Republican defeat in 1882. He never threatened to bolt the party, but he encouraged party leaders to be more responsive to the people, who in Eskridge's mind delegated the true power.

Understanding Emporia's social and political structure is integral to understanding Eskridge's values and attitudes and how they changed in the 1890s. The political climate was dominated by the Republican Party. In Eskridge's heyday the Republican Party was the only viable political party in the area, and the Republicans so dominated Lyon County politics that the only things to quarrel over were minute details and personal grudges. As was the case in many small towns, Emporia's differing po-



litical views were represented by the two factions that existed in the city and centered on its two most powerful banks. These factions competed for political power at the local and state levels. Emporia's finances were entrusted largely in these competing banks: Charles S. Cross's First National Bank and Calvin Hood's Emporia National Bank, both of which had deep local roots. The late U.S. Senator Preston B. Plumb had founded the Emporia National. Upon Plumb's death, Hood, known as the "Major," took over as the bank's president. William Allen White described the nature of local banking:

The banks fought for business. Their customers lined up behind the banks, and all over this part of the world in the nineties as the economic scenery of the world was changing. Factions, feuds, internal bitter-nesses, wicked and sometimes bloody rivalries were fostered at the front doors of the banks in towns and cities across the land—at least across our western land.²⁵

Most of the town's leaders aligned themselves with one bank or the other, resulting in a rather tense conglomeration of egos, especially noticeable around election time. Quarrels between town leaders represented quarrels between bank factions in this common small-town alliance system.

23. *Emporia Daily Republican*, April 6, 1899; *Emporia Daily Gazette*, April 6, 1899; White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 313. White incorrectly recalls in his autobiography that the incident happened in 1898, when it really occurred on April 6, 1899.

24. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Random House, 1956), 132. Eskridge said little in the *Republican* about White's famous words, save for insinuating that its tone was harsh. See *Emporia Weekly Republican*, December 23, 1897. William Allen White, "Early Autobiography by William Allen White, [1927]," ch. 5, 8 (manuscript, William Allen White Collection, University Libraries and Archives, Emporia State University).

25. White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 263.

William Allen White was beholden to the Hood faction. Several of Hood's associates had lent White the money to buy the *Gazette*. Based on old family friendships, Plumb's estate lent him one thousand dollars with which to start. Several other people loaned him money for the same reasons. Hood, who had supported Morgan when he owned the *Gazette*, loaned White money as well.²⁶ White fully understood how the factional system worked in Emporia and used it effectively. But the nature of politics and factions was changing in Emporia as many of its original settlers and leading businessmen died or retired. In fact, the system was slowly breaking up on its own as citizens entrenched on both sides retired from civic interests and business, and White witnessed its dissolution in the years following Eskridge's death.

During the late 1890s, however, Eskridge allied with Cross and the First National Bank and fought many factional battles through his newspaper, especially at election time. When White purchased the *Gazette* and started to gain circulation and prominence, Eskridge used him as a whipping boy in the *Republican's* columns. With White acting as surrogate for the Emporia National Bank group and Eskridge representing the First National alliance, the factional battles were covered in the newspapers.²⁷ Eskridge kept up the fight until his death but lost ground to White, who achieved national celebrity for "What's the Matter With Kansas?" only a year after purchasing the *Gazette*. White's success overshadowed Eskridge and the *Republican*. Furthermore, editors in other cities began to question his convictions. Eskridge reprinted their comments and offered his rebuttal frequently, but it was clear from their comments and the *Republican's* declining subscription base that Eskridge was losing the battle to White and his contemporaries.²⁸

By the late 1890s Eskridge's alliance with the First National Bank and Charles S. Cross was no longer fortunate. Cross's bank was overextended, and to maintain the credit he needed and the appearance that business was fine at

the First National, he had illegally floated a series of worthless bonds. By 1898 creditors were beckoning and Cross was in a precarious position. Only a select few of Emporia's elite knew that Cross was in trouble. Eskridge, who was involved heavily in the finances of the bank, knew about the difficulty and simultaneously realized that his fortunes were in peril as well. Unfortunately for Cross, Calvin Hood also knew of the bond scheme and its imminent failure. Aware that federal bank examiners were closing in on Cross's crimes, Hood solicited William Allen White's assistance, mainly because White was Cross's friend, whereas Hood was his competitor. Hood confided to White that he had known of Cross's troubles for a while and had arrived at a solution. Hood's proposition was simple: White would go to Cross on behalf of Major Hood and offer to buy the junk bonds, effectively taking control of the bank's assets and debts. Cross's banking career would be finished, but the bank would be saved, and the depositors and creditors would be protected. Given Emporia's political climate and Cross's large debt burden, Hood's plan was quite generous. But he had the capital to assume the debt and, not incidentally, realized that he could eliminate his major competitor.²⁹

White's response to the proposition was timid: he told Hood that he did not think he could do it. Hood was disappointed, and White's own disappointment at his timidity years after the incident is painfully evident. White clearly regretted his lack of resolve in his autobiography. "I was a coward and knew it, and went to the 'Major' in humiliation and told him I just could not do it, that I had tried and it would not come." White recalled passing the First National Bank on his way home one afternoon, knowing that the examiner was in the office about ready to close down Cross's bank and cause great loss to many in Emporia. He recalled Cross waving and smiling at him as he passed by, either oblivious to his own downfall or keeping up appearances. White's angst is clear as he witnessed the demise of the amiable man. Later that afternoon, Cross killed himself at his Sunnyslope farm west of Emporia, setting into motion a painful series of stories and investigations that revealed the extent of Cross's deception and its consequences.³⁰

26. *Ibid.*, 256–57.

27. For the Eskridge–White battle, see *Emporia Weekly Republican*, January 25, April 16, 1896, August 4, 1898, January 12, February 16, April 13, June 1, June 8, August 24, 1899. For an article outlining some of the factional battles between the *Republican* and other newspapers in Emporia, see *Emporia Weekly Republican*, July 6, 1899.

28. Eskridge quoted the following papers in the *Emporia Weekly Republican*: *Kansas City Star*, August 31, 1899; *Lawrence Journal*, January 2, 1896, January 29, 1897; *Syracuse Journal*, June 1, 1899; *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 3, 1899; *Wichita Beacon*, June 1, 1899.

29. White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White*, 315–18. Such a story begs for corroborating evidence. Yet the evidence is elusive; to the author's knowledge, White's autobiography contains the only known account of this meeting. Neither the *Gazette* nor the *Republican* carried accounts of this proposed "back room" deal.

30. *Ibid.*, 316. See also *Emporia Weekly Republican*, November 17–December 29, 1898. Eskridge's coverage is predictably favorable to Cross. In

During the 1890s Eskridge allied himself with Charles C. Cross, president of the First National Bank. When the bank failed in 1898, it was a travesty from which Eskridge would never fully recover.

The failure of the First National Bank shook the town's foundation, including its political structure. The Cross faction dissolved under the stress, and Eskridge, for one, never recovered, financially or politically. A level of trust had been lost in the town. Eskridge himself was devastated. He had defended his ally to the end and beyond. Writing in the *Republican*, Eskridge supported Cross repeatedly and attempted to assure Emporians that the bank would survive.³¹ This was a dream of course; Eskridge's efforts to help save the bank had failed.

Eskridge's already unsound finances were wounded severely by the bank failure. The *Republican* was in dire financial straits at a time when it was facing increasing competition from White's *Gazette*. Eskridge normally would have responded to competition by increasing the size of his paper and making improvements to its physical plant or redesigning the paper itself. Without sufficient financial resources to mount an offensive, Eskridge was forced to make do with his existing resources and hope that he could keep his advertisers and his contracts. White, however, was doing his best to cut into Eskridge's share of Emporia's newspaper business. In the *Republican*, Eskridge accused White of trying to steal his advertisers by using the bank scandal to make Eskridge and the *Republican* look insolvent.³² In fact, Eskridge was sixty-five thousand dollars in debt and was going through court proceedings for bankruptcy. In February 1899 Eskridge, through a receivership agreement, was forced to turn over some of his property to pay for his debts. He surrendered his farm and his office building, keeping his print shop and the newspaper as a

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"tool of his trade." The *Gazette* covered the proceedings far more candidly than did Eskridge in his *Republican*. Eskridge responded to the embarrassing coverage by saying that "we can inform the *Gazette* that we have made a fortune and lost it. We lost it by banking on Emporia." His statement was honest; Eskridge had believed that Cross would correct his errors and regain solvency. Eskridge had borrowed large sums of money from several banks in St. Louis and New York to cover his own obligations as well as those of Cross and his cashier. Whether this was based on friendship alone or more questionable motives is unknown, but Eskridge was using his own credit to shore up Cross's finances. Cross's suicide shattered Eskridge's hope of repayment and forced him into bankruptcy.³³

While facing financial ruin and the slow decline of his newspaper, Eskridge endorsed a new progressive Republican reform agenda. By backing this new reform movement, he reflected the coming changes, although few of his contemporaries recognized it.

Even before the politically turbulent 1890s Eskridge and his party had come to support a bimetallic economic policy. The National Republican Party platform of 1892 "demand[ed] the use of both gold and silver as standard money" in its platform, and the Kansas Republicans ex-

the *Emporia Daily Gazette*, see November 16–22, 1898. The *Gazette's* coverage is superior, reporting "hard luck stories" of Emporians who lost money in the bank.

31. Cross's suicide is recorded in the *Emporia Weekly Republican*, November 17, 1898; *Emporia Daily Republican*, November 17, 21, 1898.

32. *Emporia Weekly Republican*, February 16, 1899.

33. Approximately \$1.35 million in 2004 dollars. Eskridge's business records are no longer extant, but the following sources outline his situation: Bankruptcy proceedings papers, C.V. Eskridge, National Archives and Records Administration, Kansas City, Mo.; *Emporia Daily Gazette*, November 19, 1898, February 11, 20, 1899; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, June 8, 1899.

PLICITLY called for bimetallism.³⁴ The party retained this plank in 1896 but carefully distinguished between William Jennings Bryan's advocacy of free silver and bimetallism. The Republicans scored a great victory that year despite the combined efforts of Democrats and Populists, but they did not make good on their promises, at least not to Eskridge's satisfaction. He chastised the Republicans for not honoring their platform and protested in the *Republican*:

For forty years the Republican party has been teaching us that bi-metallism—the use of gold and silver on an equal footing—was right. Now, it turns right around and says to us that what it taught was false, illogical, and morally wrong. What do you think of such a teacher? Can you follow it blindly into new heresies? Speak! Or follow, what would be more becoming, observe the silence which nearly always follows the remorse of an accusing conscience.³⁵

Eskridge's advocacy of a bimetallic standard was one piece of his political philosophy throughout the 1890s, but in 1899 he carefully articulated his ideas, which he asserted were rooted in true Republican principle.

Eskridge proposed the bimetallic standard as a means of promoting political and corporate reform. He believed that a bimetal policy would discourage the formation and operation of trusts. He stated that “[e]ither metal alone as a basis for money could be more easily cornered than both as constituting one standard” because the gold supply was so limited. But with a bimetal standard, “supplemented by stringent legislation against combinations to rob the masses, trusts in a few years, would undoubtedly be broken up” so that the nation's different sections could develop their own industries. Eskridge also proposed additional reforms: he advocated imposing a “heavy income tax” on in-

comes greater than five thousand dollars; he supported legislation to prevent railroads “from discriminating against interior points”; and he favored legislation that amounted to price controls on products considered “the necessities of life.”³⁶

The “Boss-Busters,” who came to power in Kansas shortly after the turn of the century, shared the progressive reform outlook that Eskridge articulated at the end of his life. Men such as Eskridge's competitor William Allen White, Edward Hoch, Chester I. Long, and others, many of whom were newspaper men, advocated the breakup of the old Republican political machine in favor of a more reform-minded and responsive political system. As historian Robert S. La Forte stated:

The Kansas movement was created by a number of forces, including rising economic expectations and a desire, by developing smaller economic interests, to have a larger share of the marketplace. But just as important in creating unrest were party factionalism, ambition for office, and a sincere interest in furthering democratic idealism.³⁷

Eskridge's opinions in the spring and summer of 1899 anticipated this progressive Republican reform movement. Yet, in his time Eskridge was seen as a renegade by fellow newspaper editors. The *Kansas City Journal* said Eskridge “needs lassoing.” Some editors believed he would bolt to the Democratic Party, and others wondered if he was becoming a late-blooming Populist. While none of these editors could quite settle on what Eskridge had become, they all perceived a shift in his political ideology that was hardly veiled. Not all of his colleagues were surprised. One Republican paper stated that Eskridge's thoughts were “nothing more than what a great many fair minded and thoughtful republicans are thinking about” and that he was “a pioneer in the revolt against the encouragement the republican party is giving to trusts and corporations.”³⁸ The *Eureka Messenger*, a Democratic newspaper, chastised Es-

34. For the party platforms, see Republican Party Platform of 1892, “The American Presidency Project,” http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/site/docs/doc_platforms.php?platindex=R1892; Republican Party Platform of 1896, “1896: The Republican Party Platform,” <http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/gopplatform.html>. The Kansas Republican Platform of 1896 was printed in the *Emporia Weekly Republican*, June 14, 1896. For the difference between bimetallism and free silver, and the Republicans' use of the bimetallism doctrine in 1896, see Walter T. K. Nugent, *Money and American Society, 1865–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 191–96. After the Republican victory of 1896, the party did not follow through on the issue. See Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867–1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 118–19; Scott G. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 283, 286.

35. *Emporia Weekly Republican*, November 16, 1899.

36. *Ibid.*, June 1, 1899. This issue carries a comprehensive outline of Eskridge's political propositions at this time.

37. Robert S. La Forte, *Leaders of Reform: Progressive Republicans in Kansas, 1900–1916*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 11.

38. *Wichita Beacon* quotation in *Emporia Weekly Republican*, June 1, 1899. All others are quoted in the *Emporia Weekly Republican* on the following dates: *Syracuse Journal*, June 1, 1899; *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 3, 1899; *Kansas City Star*, August 31, 1899; *Kansas City Journal*, June 1, 1899.

Throughout the 1890s Eskridge began to endorse a new progressive Republican Party agenda, advocating in particular the bimetallic standard as a means of promoting political and corporate reform. Eskridge, among others, authored this 1895 address (right) to the "Republicans of Kansas," a four-page discourse printed by the Emporia Republican.

kridge for his tardiness, saying that "[t]here was elegant opportunity and demand in 1896 for such brave utterances as the *Republican* has given forth [denouncing the gold standard] during the past ten days." Eskridge responded rather sheepishly: "It is never too late to do good."³⁹ And Eskridge was not too late. He had not converted to Bryanism or Populism; instead, he was embracing a distinct, new movement.

The energy of Kansas Populism largely predated Eskridge's call for reform. However, understanding the Populist reform agenda and the support it enjoyed in Kansas lends valuable insight into Eskridge's politics. The boom era of the first half of the 1880s in which Eskridge had participated came to an abrupt end in the middle of that decade. Historian Gene Clanton has summed up the spirit of the boom era well: "The land, they assumed, was there to be conquered. . . . Whatever assisted in accomplishing that end was adjudged wise and good and right; whatever stood in the way was considered an obstacle to progress."⁴⁰ By the winter of 1887–1888 the "unfounded optimism" of years past had been crushed by excessive public and private debt, rapid inflation followed by rapid deflation, and adverse climate conditions. Between 60 and 75 percent of Kansas farm acreage was mortgaged when farm prices began to fall in the late 1880s. The economic downturn continued into the 1890s and was exacerbated by the Panic of 1893. Historian Raymond Miller emphasized that the adverse economic conditions, especially falling prices, "reinforced and exaggerated a condition which would have been serious had prices never fallen, but which, emphasized by that decline, became almost intolerable."⁴¹

FOR FREE SILVER.

Address of the Kansas Republican Silver League.

The Financial Question Set Forth as the Leading Issue--Free Coinage of Silver Favored in Preference to the Single Gold Standard.

The Executive Committee of the Kansas Republican Silver League met at Topeka July 29th and formulated the following address to the republican voters of the state:

<p>TO THE REPUBLICANS OF KANSAS: The most important problem of current politics, confronting the Republican party at this time, is finance. Upon the attitude and proper solution</p>	<p>To the patriotic and earnest consideration of these questions we respectfully invite the Republicans of Kansas. The gold monometalists cannot tolerate the idea of bimetalism, or the res-</p>
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But economics do not entirely explain the rise of Kansas Populism. Kansas Republicans failed to enact reforms they had promised to make in the late 1880s, inviting a reform-minded third party into Kansas politics. According to historian Jeffrey Ostler, the absence of dynamic two-party competition in Kansas gave the dominant Republicans little benefit to follow through with reform initiatives. "A sufficient number of politicians perceived little political risk in ignoring demands for reform and ultimately accepted the arguments of powerful bankers and railroad magnates."⁴² With the reformers alienated by the Kansas Republicans, they turned to the nascent Populist movement to achieve their political goals.

Populism had substantial support in Lyon and surrounding counties, particularly Osage, in the 1890s. Ostler estimated Populist support among voters in Lyon, Chase, Morris, Osage, and Coffey Counties at 40 percent or greater.⁴³ Although Populism faded by the late 1890s, the strong support it garnered in its heyday proved that Kansans supported reform. The progressive Republicans

39. Eureka Messenger quotation in *Emporia Weekly Republican*, June 8, 1899.

40. Raymond C. Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 11 (March 1925): 469–89; O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), 27.

41. Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," 489; Clanton, *Kansas Populism*, 56, 475; Robert C. McMath, *American Populism: A Social*

History (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 46; H. Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 180–86, 196–97.

42. Jeffrey Ostler, "Why the Populist Party Was Strong in Kansas and Nebraska but Weak in Iowa," *Western Historical Quarterly* 23 (November 1992): 470–71.

43. Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880–1892* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 25.

capitalized on that mandate. Some reforms that Eskridge espoused, especially bimetallism, were issues that Populists supported as well. But Eskridge, like White, saw Populists as hayseed reformers. Eskridge's reform beliefs borrowed from Populist ideology, but they were more moderate and actually in line with the Kansas Republican Party.

So, how do we explain Eskridge's personal political journey? First, he always had supported a loose monetary system. He gave some support to the Greenbackers in the 1870s long before he advocated bimetallism. Even in this time period his colleagues accused him of straying from the Republican Party. Second, however, understanding the motivation behind Eskridge's call for railroad reform is somewhat more complicated. His record on railroad dealings was suspect at best, and he was accused of improper dealings, particularly with the Santa Fe, throughout his later career.⁴⁴ Eskridge spent many years attempting to lure the railroads to build lines to smaller communities, so his call for an end to discrimination against interior points is understandable. Perhaps Eskridge had a change of heart late in life when it came to railroad corruption, but he did not support the Populist call for government ownership. Instead he proposed reform to ensure competition. In the end it appears that the railroads distanced themselves from Eskridge. After his bankruptcy and with the declining readership in the *Republican*, Eskridge simply became steadily less valuable to the railroads in his later years.

Why did Eskridge embrace reform? His own failures may have served as a notice to him that reform was necessary and right. Although it is difficult to judge whether Eskridge's changing political philosophy was sincere, it certainly made good copy in the *Republican*. Fellow editors noticed his attitudes and reprinted his comments in their papers. Eskridge's feud with White, who grew more notable as Eskridge lost recognition, kept a loyal audience from Eskridge's old faction. Eskridge may have recognized that his opinions and diatribes were his best effort to attract people to the *Republican*—and him.

In the aftermath of his bankruptcy, Eskridge made one last effort to save his newspaper and compete with White's *Gazette*. In November 1899 Eskridge completed a new and

44. *Emporia News*, October 31, 1879. In addition to White's account, cited in footnote 21, see *Emporia Democrat*, 21 August 1889.

more modest office building to replace the building he lost to receivership. How he financed the construction is unclear, although it appears that he had settled his First National Bank affairs through the bankruptcy agreement as best he could.⁴⁵ The move was classic Eskridge; when he felt pressure from competitors or detractors, he normally enhanced his newspaper somehow. But Eskridge soon found himself in declining health. In March 1900 he fell ill. By April he began to seek medical attention for his condition, which was later diagnosed as cirrhosis of the liver. No mention of the illness was made in the *Republican* until June, when the nature of the illness was disclosed in a cryptic article. Although the writer asserted that Eskridge was "slowly improving," it appears that Eskridge was no longer running the paper from his office and was bedridden. The next week some reminiscences of Eskridge's old days were printed in preparation for the inevitable. The end came on Sunday, July 15, 1900. On Thursday, Eskridge had requested a box containing some important papers to get his affairs in order. The box actually contained a .38-caliber revolver. Early Sunday morning, Eskridge awoke and asked his family to leave the room and get some sleep. Shortly thereafter he took his own life, "shooting himself twice in the region of the heart."⁴⁶

Monday's newspapers reported the death to a stunned community. Eskridge's *Republican* carried stories and eulogies to its dead editor. White's *Gazette* wrote the following:

On that chill autumn day when Emporia bade good-by [*sic*] to Charley Cross, there stood apart from the throng that blackened the green lawn near the dead man's home, a stocky old man, with a rusty thin overcoat buttoned tightly over his chest, his soft hat was pulled down over his face—rigid with a grief too powerful to display. The man was Governor Eskridge and no one in all the congregation mourned more deeply than he. For the funeral of Cross was the end of Eskridge.⁴⁷

White's sad, poetic words were painfully true in many ways. Eskridge never fully recovered after Cross's death

45. *Emporia Weekly Republican*, February 16, November 30, 1899.

46. *Emporia Daily Republican*, July 16, 1900; *Emporia Weekly Republican*, July 19, 1900. The first mention of Eskridge's declining health (*ibid.*, June 7, 1900) states that he was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver, but his obituaries state that he suffered from liver cancer. A sufficient explanation is lacking, which is common with many nineteenth-century medical diagnoses.

47. *Emporia Gazette*, July 16, 1900.


Facing financial ruin and declining health, Eskridge took his own life in his Emporia home (right) on Sunday, July 15, 1900.

and the ensuing bank scandal. White gained much from the event, although he stated years later that he felt guilt over the matter. The *Gazette* became Emporia's flagship newspaper shortly after Eskridge's death, and White's obituary for Eskridge reflects the tense relationship between the two rival editors.

The *Gazette* published a tribute to Eskridge a week later, entitled "The Sound of a Voice That is Still," that contained various eulogies from newspapers across the state.⁴⁸ Several interesting conclusions can be drawn from the editors' remarks. The fact that Eskridge committed suicide seemed not to bother the majority of people; in fact, he was lauded for ending his life with dignity and honor. The *Atchison Daily Globe* "congratulate[d] humanity on the fact that Mr. Eskridge had courage enough to shoot himself; when a man is hopelessly ill, and suffering great pain, suicide is not an offense against morals or common sense." The consensus was that Eskridge had died nobly and saved himself and others from grief and pain. His colleagues also noted his years of work in politics in laudatory terms that only the dead are afforded. Their comments reflected little of the acrimony that had existed years ago. Instead the writers recognized Eskridge's achievements and his will to win. The *Topeka State Journal's* eulogy praised his political acumen, while showing a humorously limited understanding of the man: "He was a man of few words and while he seemed to take small notice of things he was always alert with mind and eye and had an intimate knowledge of local and state affairs."⁴⁹ Calling Eskridge a man of few words certainly did not fit his character.

Eskridge's final years illustrate the limits of his political career. His career was significant at the local level, but he never attained the success that some of his colleagues



and contemporaries achieved. Eskridge was never a U.S. senator; that position fell to Preston B. Plumb, whom Eskridge first met when he worked at the *Herald of Freedom* in the 1850s. He never became governor; he was the lieutenant governor for only a short time and was passed over for a gubernatorial nomination. His most successful political enterprise was his editorship of the *Emporia Republican*. But even in this position, Eskridge was edged out by a better competitor. William Allen White, in the infancy of his career, overshadowed Eskridge at the twilight of his. Eskridge died a financial failure, with only a portion of the influence he had once possessed. Nonetheless, his advocacy of reform was significant; through his writings, Eskridge anticipated the reform championed by the progressive wing of the Kansas Republican Party, which came in the decade after his death. This was the noteworthy achievement of the latter years of his career. Eskridge's use of his party organ newspaper allowed him to articulate his ideas to a wide audience as long as they would listen. His financial failure was the result of questionable practices and a strict adherence to a bitterly factional political system. Eskridge played the political game hard, but in the end, he faced scandal, ruin, and the loss of power as a result of his actions. His reform ideas cannot be reconciled entirely with his political and business records. 

48. Ibid., July 23, 1900. White used the same line, borrowed from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break" in his obituary of Charles S. Cross. See *ibid.*, November 16, 1899.

49. *Atchison Daily Globe* quotation in *ibid.*, July 23, 1900; *Topeka State Journal* quotation in *ibid.*